

**Commission for Historical and
Architectural Preservation**



**Ann Wiggins Brown House
1501 Presstman Street**

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

May 13, 2008

Ann Wiggins Brown was born August 9, 1912 (sometimes also listed as December 6, 1915) to Henry Francis Brown and Mary Allen Wiggins. Ann Wiggins Brown is the oldest of 4 daughters. Her father, Doctor Harry Francis Brown was a prominent Baltimore physician and the son of a slave. Her mother, Mary Allen Wiggins was a studied pianist and singer of Scottish-Irish, African American and Cherokee Indian decent.

Ann Wiggins Brown attended Baltimore City's Douglass High School which was located on Dolphin Street at the time. There she studied with legendary music teacher W. Llewellyn Wilson who also taught Cab Calloway. Brown often had leading roles in the school musicals and plays directed by Wilson. Even at this young age Brown knew she wanted to be a performer, but the prospects of roles for African-American women were very limited. She saw, however, music as an open door. She loved to play her family's grand piano and listen to classical music. Brown applied to the Peabody School of Music, but due to her race she was denied admission. With the encouragement of Constance Black, wife of the Baltimore Sun owner, Brown applied to the Julliard School of Music. At the age of 16 she was accepted and became the schools first black vocalist.



Several years later, she auditioned for George Gershwin's almost completed musical *Porgy*. Brown contacted Gershwin after reading a news paper article about his opera adaptation of Dorothy and DuBose Hayward's novel "Porgy." At her audition she sang several classical pieces and a song titled "The Man I Love." Gershwin then asked her to sing a spiritual piece. Brown was offended and defensive; she felt strongly that whites expected African-Americans to only perform spiritual pieces. Brown politely stated that she did not have any of that music with her but then snapped, asking Gershwin "why it is you people always expect black singers to sing spirituals?" And without much reaction she saw he understood her concern. Brown said that after this her whole attitude melted away, and she wanted nothing more to sing something spiritual for Gershwin. She performed an emotional version of "City Called Heaven." Gershwin then stood from his chair, walked across the room and hugged Brown. He knew he had found his Bess. Gershwin was so impressed he expanded the role, creating what we know today as *Porgy and Bess*. He rewrote the play for her character Bess to sing the lullaby "Summertime."

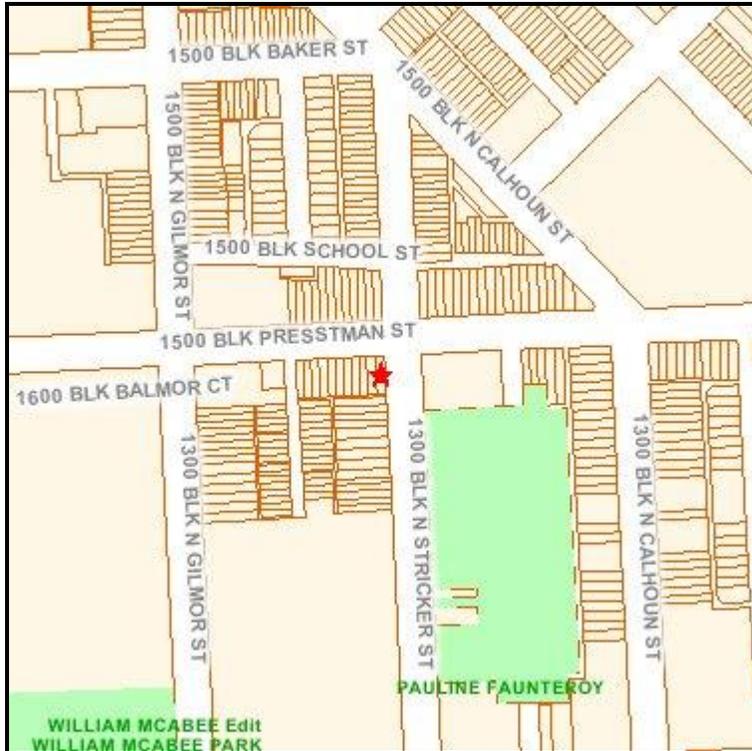
Throughout her life Anne Wiggins Brown was a victim of discrimination, first as an African-American and then seen by some of her peers as "not black enough." Gershwin, looking past all of this, cast her as Bess saying, "I don't see why my Bess shouldn't be café au lait." When *Porgy and Bess* was to play at the Nation Theater in Washington, a segregated play house, Brown refused to perform. Her cast also participated in this protest, almost shutting down the show. She refused to perform if her parents and friends and other African-Americans could not watch her sing. The house was desegregated for that evening.

Brown continued to perform in the United States until 1948 when she embarked on a European tour. While in Norway, she married gold-medal ski jumper Thorleif Schkelderup. In the mid-1950s she developed asthma and turned her talents to teaching. Anne Wiggins Brown is currently a citizen of Norway.

The Anne Wiggins Brown House is a three-story brick Italianate rowhouse. The home is located in Baltimore's Sandtown-Wichester neighborhood and the Old West Baltimore National Register Historic District.

The Ann Wiggins Brown House meets CHAP Guidelines for designation:

2. is associated with the life of an outstanding historical person or persons.



Site Map



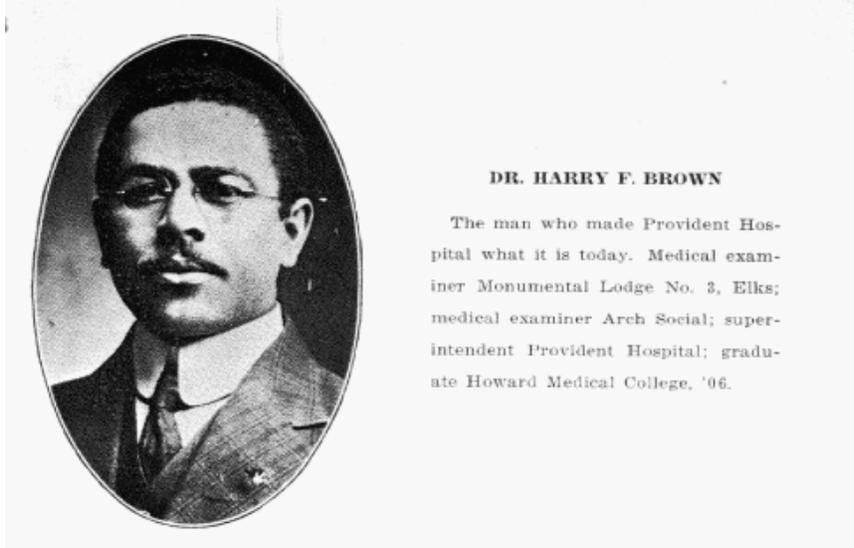
Aerial Photo



A young Ann Wiggins Brown



Brown performing as Bess in "Porgy and Bess"



DR. HARRY F. BROWN

The man who made Provident Hospital what it is today. Medical examiner Monumental Lodge No. 3, Elks; medical examiner Arch Social; superintendent Provident Hospital; graduate Howard Medical College, '06.

Brown's father, Dr. Harry F. Brown



1501 Presstman Street in Sandtown-Winchester